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Chairman Ajit Pai  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 12th Street SW,  
Washington, DC 20554

July 23, 2019

Dear Chairman Pai,

I am writing today in response to the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) Public Notice which, among other things, considers changes to the Universal Service Fund (USF) programs, including E-Rate. Before delving into my response to the proposed changes, I want to thank the FCC for its continued support for the E-Rate program and for the critical programmatic and policy changes the commission adopted in 2014. The E-Rate program provides critical discounts to assist schools (like mine) to obtain affordable telecommunications and internet access.

Our district serves about 6000 students and about 30% of them qualify for free or reduced meals. We service students from both small rural towns as well as from a larger city in Iowa. Providing the best educational opportunities for our students is our main purpose. The support of the E-rate program is essential in allowing us to provide the best educational opportunities for our students.

The E-Rate program, and the broader USF program, is a program succeeding in its mission. As the FCC moves forward with this public notice, it is prudent to remain focused on the fact that E-Rate is a program that works. Any changes to the E-Rate program should be focused on expanding a successful program that has yet to reach its full potential and ensuring the FCC remains a good steward of the changes adopted 2014, allowing those changes to progress and play out as intended. Changes to the E-Rate program and the broader USF program must be focused on bolstering and strengthening the original intent of the underlying programmatic statute, expanding equitable access to connectivity in multiple areas, through all four USF programs (E-Rate, Rural Health Care, Lifeline, and Connect America Fund).

The organizing theme of the proposed rule is a focus on a funding cap for the USF program, including pairing E-Rate under a funding cap with Rural Health Care. E-Rate played a critical role in the rapid and significant expansion of connectivity in schools, and I am concerned that the proposed rule will unnecessarily pit two important priorities—connectivity in schools with rural health care—against each other, resulting in an arbitrary funding pressure that not only disregards and dismisses the original intent of the statute creating all four USF programs, but also stands to undermine and threaten the great progress of E-Rate.

I am opposed to the rule as drafted. The proposed rule conflicts with the original legislative intent of the underlying 1996 Telecommunications Act, which was explicit in its creation of two separate and distinct programs for schools/libraries and rural health care providers. The proposed rule unnecessarily pits schools/libraries against rural hospitals/clinics, creating a false race to the bottom under which both programs and the communities they support lose. The proposed rule will likely immobilize E-Rate funding and expand confusion among beneficiaries. Specific to E-Rate and schools, where school system leaders have a responsibility to balance their budget annually, the idea that the E-Rate funding would be hamstrung and lack certainty in availability will certainly impact how districts plan to continue (or discontinue, should funding not be certain or reliable) their effort to build out connectivity to meet the learning needs of their students.


The goal of the E-Rate program is simple: equitable access to affordable connectivity. While the overwhelming majority of schools and libraries are connected, the ongoing conversation about connectivity and E-Rate must continue to support

and protect the shift from establishing connectivity to ensuring adequate connectivity (specifically, access to high-speed broadband). A massive overhaul of the E-Rate program without considering its initial purpose—one that has yet to be fully recognized—is poor policy. The FCC must support continuation of an E-Rate program that remains focused on expanding the E-Rate program from simple connectivity to expanded connectivity.

Our district has used E-Rate funds to support technology across our district. Specifically, we have used it to purchase Internet services. These services have allowed us to provide 1:1 computer access to students 5-12 and 2:1 for our K-4 students. Through this level of technology and connectivity, they have been able to access on-line resources and have expanded the “walls” of our classroom to the greater world. Many of our high school students are able to take on-line courses for college credit and credit recovery courses for high school credit. Through this program, our teachers and other staff have been able to connect with resources and experts across the region, the country and even the world.

In closing, I reiterate my district’s continued, strong support for and reliance upon the E-Rate program for being able to access and afford the high-speed connectivity that is so central to our students’ learning. Thank you for considering these comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Doug Wheeler". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Doug Wheeler, Ph.D.  
Superintendent